

Fishing for Answers in Con Chim; **Increasing Community Participation through Education Programmes.**



The Con Chim Marine Sanctuary is a small rehabilitation project and must rely on the willing participation of the local communities to work towards its objectives, to enhance, protect and manage the biodiversity in Thi Nai Lagoon. As in many coastal programmes, capacity building amongst local communities is crucial to the protection of the aquatic resources by building awareness and to encourage the adoption of more sustainable fishing and aquaculture practices.

While local community support can be a great strength to a project, often it is the total dependency of livelihood of numerous Coastal Resource Users which is the greatest threat to the biodiversity the project aims to protect. Even in fisheries utilizing low technology levels, the sheer numbers of harvesters places severe pressure on the local fish stocks and relentless disturbance which degrade habitats. Con Chim Marine Sanctuary is located in Thi Nai Lagoon an area of over 5000ha that once possessed extensive Mangrove habitats, now lost to the encroachment of commercial shrimp ponds. The loss of Mangrove based productivity, combined with failing shrimp harvests has lead to a downwards spiral of overfishing, an increase in destructive fishing methods, such as electric fishing, and further habitat lost. The Lagoon also has significant areas of productive Seagrass beds, primarily *Zostera japonicas*, suffering from the effects of overuse. A Seagrass Monitoring Programme will be required to assess the scale and impacts on the major Seagrass beds. For the planned resource protection to be effective, alternative livelihoods suitable to the local communities need to be identified and applied.

Prior to the latest Mangrove Planting Scheme an education format was designed to engage the primary village participants in basic ecological concepts. In this session we were introducing the legislation for the protection of Mangroves, an overview of the effects of overfishing, and a preliminary section on the lagoon's primary habitats of Mangroves and Seagrass beds. The intent was to primarily link the ecological concepts, to what the people who live on Thi Nai Lagoon see on a daily basis. To allow the Con Chim Management Team to acknowledge the practical awareness local fishers and aquaculturists already have on the effects of fishing on different habitats. The next step was to begin to link this foundation to the needs of the management program in rehabilitating these habitats. The Management Team used this opportunity to hand out the Importance of Mangroves Poster, and Con Chim Leaflet produced to support Community education. The challenge was to create interest, within the communities' time constraints of a given education session.

Adapting ideas utilized to advantage at the Nha Trang Capacity Building Workshop, we decided to ease the atmosphere and to intersperse the training and legislation lectures, with a practical exercise by the community and a short informative game. The game was set up before hand, the groups were told of a Heron out feeding on the

Lagoon. Conditions were hard for the Heron with just as much plastics and discarded fishing gear littering the bird's feeding grounds, as there was fish to catch. The picture was displayed showing good food versus bad catch for the Heron. Then small bags containing either samples of common waste found in the Lagoon, or a small plastic fish, were presented to each person. The group with the most edible Heron food, was declared the survivor and awarded some snacks.

The practical exercise consisted of a table of Habitats versus a wide range of fishing methods. Each group was asked to decide if a fishing method was conducted in each habitat and then rate its effect on that habitat as high, medium or low. The groups were led by an infield Staff member of Con Chim Marine Sanctuary, to keep the discussion on target and to prompt with questions. A lively group debate resulted, with good natured group rivalry being displayed when a group representative presented their conclusions. The deliberation over the topic and the degree of involvement from the villagers, who are from several spheres of resource use, those whose homes and livelihoods are an integral part heavily altered environments of today's Thi Nai Lagoon.